

# **The Al-Azhar Institute – A Key Player in Shaping the Religious and Political Discourse in Egypt**

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The status of the Al-Azhar Institute at local, regional, and even international levels has been improving significantly since Abdel Fatah al-Sisi was elected President of Egypt in 2014 – due to the fact that it is a strategic partner in the battle against the rising tide of Islamic terror and the religious rhetoric of terrorist organizations. The institution has been an active supporter of the regime’s political agenda ever since the 1952 revolution of the Free Officers Movement, with the understanding that preserving good relations with the regime would ultimately earn power for Al-Azhar, and serve to boost its image in the eyes of Egyptian society. In the 1970’s, for example, Al-Azhar participated in the propaganda war lead by Anwar Sadat against the Communists in the country, who were viewed as a threat to the regime’s stability. It wasn’t for naught that in December 2014, al-Sisi announced his intent to wage his war against Islamic terror from Al-Azhar. From his perspective, the Al-Azhar Institute held a key role in creating a counter narrative and an alternative interpretation of Islamic law, which could suppress the trend of radicalization in society, and challenge the radical discourse emanating from the Islamic terror organizations’ study halls. Al Qaeda, ISIS, and the Muslim Brotherhood were specifically targeted. Al-Sisi surpassed himself when he ruled that there was an urgent need to lead a “religious revolution” to make the religious discourse apply to modern times.

*“We spoke earlier about the importance of religious discourse, and I want to reiterate that we are not doing enough with regard to true religious discourse. The problem has never been with our faith. Perhaps the problem lies in ideology, and this ideology is sanctified among us. I am talking about the religious discourse that applies to the present era. It is inconceivable that the ideology we sanctify should become a source of concern, of danger, of killing, and of destruction all over the world. I am referring not to "religion," but to "ideology" – the body of ideas and texts that we have sanctified over the course of centuries, to the point that challenging them has become very difficult. It has reached the point where this ideology poses a threat to the world. It is inconceivable that 1.6 billion Muslims need to kill the other inhabitants of the world – a total of about 7 billion. **I say these things here, at Al-Azhar, before religious clerics and scholars...you must oppose it with resolve. Let me say it again: We need to revolutionize our religion.** The world in its entirety awaits your words, because the Islamic nation is being torn apart, destroyed, and is heading towards devastation..we ourselves are responsible.”*

The Al-Azhar Institute, which was established by the Fatimids in the year 972, is considered to be

the most prominent and influential educational institution in the Sunni Muslim world since 1172, when Salah al-Din al-Ayubbi took control of it. Since then, the school has filled an important role not only in the religious arena but also in social and political realms. After the revolution on January 25, 2011, the institute joined the public social-political discourse focusing on the country's new atmosphere and the place of religion in forming the post-revolutionary society. Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Dr. Ahmad al-Tayeb, wrote in that context an extraordinary document that was published in June 2011. The document called for Egypt to develop itself as a modern national, lawful and democratic country, with shari'a continuing to serve as the main basis for the country's laws, while totally rejecting the idea of a religious country ruled by religious leaders. In another document, published in October 2011, Dr. al-Tayeb expressed the desire to take a central role not only in Egypt, but also in the other Arab countries. Al-Azhar also expressed its support for Arab revolutions and the need for changing tyrannical regimes that were harmful to civilians. According to the Sheikh, economic reform, the implementation of Democracy, and enforcement of the law would all guarantee a return of order to Arab countries, and would ensure a peaceful existence for the civilians. With the exclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood from the public realm, as a result of it being denounced as a terror organization, Al-Azhar could act almost undisturbed to strengthen its own status in the public eye, particularly in light of the fact that the former traditionally stood out as a staunch critic of the institution. The Muslim Brotherhood viewed the institute as outdated and no more than a tool in the hands of the regime. For example, the Brotherhood accused the institution of supporting al-Sisi's military coup, and ousting President Morsi – a representative of the Brotherhood. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the spiritual leader of the movement, expressed his disappointment with the stance taken by Ahmad al-Tayeb, and accused him of abusing his position: *"I would like for Sheikh Al-Azhar to confront the Army and all of the people who suggested that he support the idea of a revolt against the President who was legitimately elected...but my hopes have been dashed...your role, Sheikh Al-Azhar, is to represent all of the Muslims, in addition to the Muslim inhabitants of Egypt, and not to be satisfied with representing only a small group within the Egyptian population."*

With no significant opposition force to contend with, Sheikh Al-Azhar and the institute's Council of Scholars of the Religious Law realized they had a window of opportunity to fill the existing vacuum, in order to increase their influence in the public realm and to leverage their power as an influential factor in religious discourse. To that end, Al-Azhar is scrupulous about defining itself as being a

pioneer of humanistic values and a model of moderate Islamic faith. As an entity that battles against terrorism and fanatical thought, as responsible for suggesting alternative interpretations to the erroneous commentaries on the holy Islamic sources. As an entity that provides tools for youth to halt extremism and develop moderate learning programs. Regarding the institute's intention to fight terrorism, Ahmad al-Tayeb announced at an international conference hosted by the Al-Azhar Institute in December 2014 that he denounced the crimes of Islamic terror organizations against innocent people. He emphasized the importance of preserving comradeship between Muslims and Christians and other ethnic groups, and called for international cooperation in this area. He said, *"Some of the members of our people have been exposed to – and continue to be influenced by – a process of 'brainwashing' by the spread of extreme ideas about the Quran and the Sunna....this made it necessary for the intellectual world to take responsibility and reveal the correct meaning of the texts and their explanations."*

This plan was put into effect during 2015, and was characterized by widespread activity of Al-Azhar in both internal and external arenas.

In the internal arena, Al-Azhar invested considerable efforts in implementing a broad reform of its education system. The central goal was to educate and cultivate in the younger generation the values of tolerance, acceptance of the "other", and a sense of belonging to the homeland. Towards achieving this goal, the "League of Al-Azhar Alumni" published a magazine for children ages 8 – 18 called "Al-Nur" – "The Light". According to the Sheikh Al-Azhar, publishing the magazine for children was necessary in order to instill in the future generation humanistic values, which would help formulate a longstanding Muslim identity, and would strengthen their affinity to the Egyptian homeland via comics and historic stories about Egypt. The magazine's editor, Naha Abas, clarified that the magazine's name is proof of the desire to illuminate the thoughts of the young people regarding the correct religious principles, and to instill within them moral values. Al-Sisi himself gave his blessing to the new magazine, and in November 2015 he promised to allocate a larger budget that would make it possible to translate the magazine into foreign languages for the purpose of distributing it as a model of moderate Islamic faith, and to prevent the spread of fanatical ideas in Muslim communities around the world. Another expression of the strengthened connection between Al-Azhar and the youth was in the launching of a unique program called "Al-Azhar Unites Us". The program promoted dialogue between the representatives of Al-Azhar and youth in 4000 youth centers, focusing on the dangers that lie in radical ideologies. Al-Azhar even

established a center for issuing religious rulings, consisting of 300 religious scholars who were active 24 hours a day, and provided immediate and direct answers to questions posed by civilians over the phone, via email, and on Facebook. Another interesting innovation, which is the first of its kind, was the opening of courses for women at Al-Azhar to train them as clerics and religious adjudicators – and to date 500 have completed the course. This development has far-reaching consequences, in that it views women as “agents” of change. That is to say, the women are now participating in the redesigning of religious life of the country, with the hope that they will inspire real social change in society. In June 2014 another center was established, under the auspices of Al-Azhar, which was supposed to follow and monitor propaganda materials of the jihad organizations on the internet, and to disseminate an opposing narrative in Arabic and in foreign languages.

In the external arena, Al-Azhar conducts conventions, conferences, and brain storming sessions with politicians and other religious representatives, with the purpose of formulating plans for coping with Islamic terrorism. On September 29 and 30, for example, a conference was held in the UN offices in New York called the “Global Youth Summit Against Violent Extremism”, which focused on the fight against ISIS. During the conference, it was decided to establish a training center that would specialize in finding and refuting religious rulings issued by extreme Islamic groups. In that context, Sheikh Al-Azhar - Ahmad al-Tayeb - held a meeting with Christian spiritual leaders in the city of Firenze, Italy, with the goal of strengthening connections with the Christian world and fostering coexistence. In addition, the Al-Azhar Institute has translated to date more than 1000 religious rulings from Arabic into English and French. It chose rulings that debunked claims made by the extremists, and published an encyclopedia in several languages about the latent danger in classifying any Muslims as apostates. Another example of Al-Azhar’s external activity can be seen in the sermons given by representatives of the institute to young Muslims living in the West, and in the scholarships awarded to them for studying Islamic sciences and Arabic at Al-Azhar. The goal is to expose the students to moderate interpretation of the sources holy to Islam, and to create “ambassadors” who will return to their native countries in order to preach those modern interpretations. Al-Azhar recently agreed to a request made by the Vatican to renew relations and strengthen the cultural bridges and inter-religious discourse between the two bodies, after a five year hiatus.

It is worth mentioning that Al-Azhar is also interested in promoting itself as a central player in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It views itself as filling an important role regarding every aspect of the

Palestinian problem, and desires to utilize its influence to pressure the international community to recognize as soon as possible a Palestinian State, with Jerusalem as its capital. It hopes to motivate the Arab and international worlds to respond to settler aggressiveness opposite Palestinians, and to attacks on the Al Aqsa mosque. An explanation for this support perhaps lies in its aspiration to promote itself as the “global” representative of all Sunnis in the world, and as one who is concerned about their welfare. In that regard, Al-Azhar is involved in widespread public relations on behalf of the Muslims in Myanmar, who are oppressed by their government. In this manner, Al-Azhar strengthens its standing in the regional arena, and it hopes that more Sunni players will join it in the fight against radicalism and religious extremism. At the beginning of January this year, the Mufti of Jerusalem and the Land of Palestine, Mohamad Hussein, stated that he saw himself as a partner in Al-Azhar’s initiative of counterterrorism, and emphasized Al-Azhar’s role in pushing for a solution to the Palestinian problem.

Al-Azhar’s activities have earned cross-border support in both the East and the West. The Salafi Al-Nur party, the scout organizations, and other Islamists such as members of Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiyya in Egypt, all view Al-Azhar as filling an important role in restraining the trend of radicalization in Muslim society, in minimizing the power of ISIS, in battling Islamophobia in the West, and in educating the younger generation with values of tolerance.

However, there are also several anti-Islamist intellectuals in Egypt who espouse the separation of religion and government, such as a Sayyid Al-Qemany, Islam Behery, and Fatima Naoot. They criticize the increasing involvement of Al-Azhar in molding religious discourse. They claim that the curriculum at Al-Azhar is tainted with extreme contents that have a negative influence on the consciousness of the youth. In addition, Al-Azhar is responsible “for the rotten fruit leaving its classrooms”, and serves as a hothouse for terrorists and extremists – including ISIS activists. Examples of such terrorists are Mohammad Ata - who took part in the September 11 attack, and Abdullah Azzam – who founded Al Qaeda. Both were graduates of Al-Azhar. Other critics focused on Al-Azhar Institute’s misconception that Democracy contradicts Islam in several aspects. Gaber Asfour, former Minister of Culture, noted in this context that “it seems that we must pose to Al-Azhar the question: is this renewal of religious discourse what President Abdel al-Sisi, head of the Republic, would wish for?” Lamia’a al-Makdem, a secular Egyptian publicist, warned in the daily paper *Al-Masry Al-Youm* that the West was attaching great significance to anything Sheikh Al-Azhar said, due to the unjustified impression that he was a religious authority. But in fact, Al-Azhar

damages Islam's image because of controversial religious rulings such as: justifying the rape of non-Muslim women in the West due to their lack of modesty. The extent of the split between Al-Azhar and the intellectual echelon was expressed in an official announcement published by Al-Azhar's Council of Senior Scholars of Religious Ruling, stating that it was subject to an unbridled attack motivated by Western Islamophobia in the West and that this attack was damaging Al-Azhar's status. Ahmad Tayeb also denounced the critics, claiming, "Defaming Al-Azhar is akin to defaming the homeland." Dr. Abbas Shuman, Deputy Chair of Al-Azhar, noted that "nobody can criticize Al-Azhar's activities over the generations...any attempt to defame Al-Azhar is as if the entire nation is defamed, and specifically in Egypt." In response to this statement, anti-Islamic intellectuals, such as Dr. Dr. Refaat al-Saeed - head of Tajamoa Party, said that Al-Azhar could not publicize such statements and that any attempt to silence the critics only closed the gate before a true renewal of religious discourse.

Despite these criticisms, it is obvious that Al-Azhar is gaining significant momentum, thanks to al-Sisi's support. He saw the institute as an important strategic partner in the battle against Islamic terror, and in reforming religious discourse. In February 2016, during Parliament's opening session, al-Sisi emphasized again the role Al-Azhar played in shaping religious discourse and the importance of fighting terrorism. Al-Azhar aims, in fact, to expand its influence not only in Egypt, but also in Muslim communities in the West.

Under al-Sisi's rule, al-Azhar undoubtedly became the most significant religious player in the Egyptian arena, and succeeded in expanding its scope of influence to also reach Muslim communities living in other countries, and in particular in the West. Al-Azhar is quite aware of its growing power, and of its key position in Egyptian society, and is subsequently demanding larger budgets. The institute has also requested to be exempt from the supervision of the Waqf ministry that controls the religious trusts, or alternately – to assimilate Al-Azhar into the ministry. At the same time, Al-Azhar's increasing power has become a cause for concern among anti-Islamist intellectuals who are convinced that Al-Azhar is an archaic institute responsible for intellectual deadlock and the radicalization in Egyptian society, and therefore there is no reason to promote it. However, the public discourse in general in Egypt places hope in the role given to Al-Azhar, and calls for a solution for the crisis of distrust between the intellectuals and Al-Azhar, through continued dialogue and discourse.

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